PLACE-NAMES IN CO. KILKENNY.

By Owen O'Kelly

GEOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

KILKENNY is a compact little county, situated in South Leinster, and containing a large tract of rich land. It is over 40 miles long from the northern boundary at Ballyouskill to the southern boundary at the Bridge of Waterford, and over 20 miles broad from Goresbridge, on the river Barrow, in the east, to the Kilmanagh hills in the west, comprising 79,6 square miles roughly, with a population of approximately 66,000.

PHYSICAL FEATURES.

The county, on the whole, is low-lying, no point within its borders rising to a greater height than 1,700 feet above sea-level. The physical features are interesting inasmuch as they contain on a reduced scale all the physical features of our country. As in the case of the whole country, we have here in Co. Kilkenny a great limestone plain in the middle of the county with hills ranged around. Also inside our borders we have the three most predominating rock formations obtaining all over Ireland. We have the limestone of the central plain, the granite of the Cuppanagh Hills and the Welsh Mountains in the south-east and the south of the county, and the sandstone and shale of the Castlecomer plateau in the north.

LAND DIVISION.

It is the names of these hills and valleys and their sub-division into baronies, townlands and fields, that will form the subject matter of this paper—names that have come down to us from the far-distant and dim past. It is well known that Co. Kilkenny can boast of the birth-place of John O'Donovan, historian and topographer, who was born in the townland of Attitimore, in the parish
of Slieverue, and who died in 1861 at the early age of 55 years. O'Donovan who was engaged on a survey of the lands of Ireland which was being carried out by the British Government from 1832 to 1839, collected, with the help of Eugene O'Curry and Dr. Petrie the names of 62,000 townlands. He compiled them some years later in neat little oblong books 7" x 3", clearly written in his own handwriting, giving the name of the county, barony, parish and townland in English, followed by the Irish equivalent and the meaning in English of the Irish name. These booklets are known as O'Donovan's Fieldname Books, though they are actually parish and townland name books. Of these 62,000 names of townlands he states that two-thirds of them are purely Irish names. Naturally enough these names obtain all over Ireland to the present day.

**NOMENCLATURE.**

The naming of the more prominent physical features of the lands of Ireland such as the mountains, valleys, plains, rivers and inlets of the sea around our coasts dates back in many instances to prehistoric times. Of the mountains it can be said that they got their names sometimes from their shape or from their aspect, and sometimes from the chiefs or tribes who occupied the foothills or who were overlords of the surrounding districts, and also, in many cases, from the minerals they were known to contain. The same can be said of the plains and valleys, while the rivers, particularly inside the borders of this county, evidently got their names from their size or from the speed at which they flowed or from the nature of the land, and in some instances from the kind of trees growing along their banks.

**HIGH LANDS.**

Taking the high lands of this county, we have Slieve Margy or Drom an Iarainn in the north, continuing from Laoighis down to Free-stone Hill adjoining the Dublin Road, and now known as the John's Well Hills, the highest point being Baun Riabhach 1,035 feet. Sliabh Mhairge or Maírge's mountain would explain this name, while Drom an Iarainn means "the hill of the iron" showing that it was known that this area contained iron as well as coal. Working clockwise, we have in the east of the county Sliabh Chathail, meaning Cathal's mountain whose son, Lochan, was connected with the old church of Cill Mhic Chathail (Kilmacahil) a 5th century church in the barony of Gowran and also the Cuppanagh hills, meaning "abounding in dock weeds." Further to the south between the river Barrow and the Nore, we have Brandon Hill, the highest eminence in the county, being 1,694 feet, and which tradition says was named after St. Brendan the
Voyager or the Navigator, though some authorities do not favour this explanation, but maintain that this hill got its name from St. Brenan or St. Brendan of Disert near Castlecomer. To the west of the Nore we have Sliabh Ui Chruinn, the old name for Tory Hill, which means "the mountain of O'Cronn." Further to the west we have the high lands of Killamery or Drom Dearg, which means "the red hill" from the nature of the sub-soil. This ridge of hills running from the Nore to the Suir across the south county comprises the Welsh mountains where the men from Wales who came over with Strongbow were given the lands and took up their abode. Across the broad valley to the west running out to Tipperary we have Tulach Ruadhain, meaning "Ruadhan's hill," now known as the Tullaroan Hills, while further north we have Drom Deilge, which was correctly translated into English in its present form, Thornback, and again across the valley opening out to North Tipperary to the north-west we have Binn an Eich, meaning "the pinnacle of the steed" or perhaps Binn an Fheich, "the pinnacle of the raven," looking down on the valley of the Nore and facing Castlecomer Plateau.

ANCIENT PATHWAYS.

In between these hills we have the Bearnacha and the Bealach, leading out to the surrounding territories. Many of these names are still in use, while some of them are known no more. The word Bearna means "a gap" and Bealach means "a horse-pathway." Working clockwise again around the county from the Castlecomer Plateau, we have a Bealach, which is the name of the townland in which it is contained, coming in between the hills from North Co Carlow through Coon towards Castlecomer. We have another Bealach running up from the valley of the Barrow at Paulstown and coming over the hills at Barnafea. Bealach Gabhrain comes next which is understood to be on the line of one of the five ancient roadways running from Tara, this particular roadway running to the south and south-west of our island. We then have Cuppanagh Gap coming up from Graignamanagh and Ballynabarna coming in from South Wexford. Across the Nore we have a Bealach, giving its name to a townland below Ballyhale, on the road to Waterford, and also Bearna na Gaoithe or Windgap coming in through the Clonamery hills. Then we have Bealach Toibin, nowadays called Ballytobin, coming in from mid-Tipperary, another Bealach coming in through the Kilmanagh hills, with Barnaghlasanagh coming in to the valley of the Nore through the Thornback hills. Then a plain, Bearna, coming in from North Tipperary through Freshford, and one other Barna coming in from Laoighis through the high lands between Ballinakill and Castlecomer.
The names of almost all our rivers and streams in this county are Irish. The name of the river Nore in Irish is believed to be derived from Feoir or Fear which means "grass," on account of its green, grassy banks. The river Barrow is understood to get its name from its slow, sluggish flow—Abha na Bailbhe, "the dull or dumb river." while the Suir is understood to mean An tSuir, the "sister" river.

So with the tributaries of the Nore, all being Irish, with the exception of the King's River which is believed to have derived its name from Niall Cailne, monarch of Ireland in the ninth century, who, when returning from an expedition in Munster, was drowned at the bridge of Callan. Some authorities maintain that Cailne lost his life near Kilree, hence the name, which means "the church of the king."

Starting from the north of the county where the Nore flows in from Laoighis we have on the left bank the Clogh and Uskerty rivers, two tributaries which meet at Disert bridge to form the Dinan river which flows into the Nore at Three Castles. The Dinan is also joined by a stream called the Douglas which rises in the upperlands of Park and flows in at Corbettstown. All four names are Irish. The Clogh river takes its name from the district of Clogh through which it flows, which in turn takes its name from Cloch, "a stone pillar" or "a stone building or fortress" once standing near the present bridge at Clogh. So also with the Uskerty river which means Uiscertach or "watery" from the nature of the land through which it flows. The meaning of the word Dinan is An Deineen the "little, noisy, vehement" river, to which name it too often asserts its right. The word Douglas in Irish means Dubh Glais, "the dark stream," from the colour of its waters. Further southwards we have the little stream of Aughmalog running into the Nore at Maddoxtown. Aughmalog in Irish means Ah Molaga, or Molaga's ford. the ancient parish church called Kilmalogga. St. Mologa's church, being in the townland of Purcell's Inch, south of Kilkenny railway station. The old name for this stream is An Soinneen Dian, "the little swift, onrushing stream." We then have the Mointeen stream flowing into the Nore at Moineen bridge at Thomastown. The word Moineen means "little bog," as this stream rising to the east in the Bramblestown and Kilmanahan hills, flows through the Kilfane bogs, and hence its name. Our next streamlet on the left bank is the Fidawn rising on the western slope of the ridge between Inistioge and Graigue-namanagh and flowing into the Nore at Ballygallon above Inistioge. Another name for this stream is Sruth na Salieog, meaning "the sally bush stream," where it runs through the townland of Sallybog. On the eastern slope of this ridge rises the Duiske river which
flows down from Brandon Hill through Graiguenamanagh into the Barrow. The meaning of Duiske is Dubh Uisce or “dark water,” from the colour of its waters which flows through the peaty soil of the mountain. Our last stream on this bank is the Clodiagh which rises on the southern slopes of Brandon, flowing through Ballygub and entering the Nore at Coolnamuck. The meaning of this name is An Cladach. “the stony river,” owing to its stony, precipitous course down the valley past Clodiagh chapel.

There are not many long or large streams flowing into the Nore in its lower reaches on the right bank within the county as the water-shed of the Tullaher hills runs in close proximity to the river from the townland of Killeen up to Thomastown. We have, however, two streams with the same name, the Arrigal and the Little Arrigal. The Arrigal rises in the high lands of Ballyfasey and flows into the Nore at Culmore, above Brownsbarn Bridge, while the Little Arrigal rises in Aughavillar and flows into the Nore at Jerpoint. The name Arrigal has two meanings in Irish. Aragal denotes “noise or patter” and also means “an oratory” or “little church,” and it is difficult to know which of these meanings should be applied, though the former would seem to be more in keeping with both these fast-flowing, noisy streams. The next tributary to the north above the King’s river is the Breagach, which collects on the eastern slopes of the Kilmanagh hills in the district of Balylcallan and flows into the Nore at Irishtown, thereby aiding the sewerage of this portion of the city of Kilkenny. The word Breagach means “lying, false, treacherous or deceitful,” and unfortunately, as in the case of the Dinan, it lives up to its reputation occasionally, as the citizens of Irishtown know to their cost. Further north we have another Arrgal coming from the hills of Ballydowel and Ballinamara, and joining the Nuenna, our second last tributary which rises in the hills of Barna and flows into the Nore below Lismaine Bridge. The meaning of the word Nuenna is understood to be a corrupt phonetic translation of uaithne in Irish meaning “green,” almost certainly referring to its green, grassy banks. And last of all we have the Goul, which means the “forked” river, flowing down through Galmoy and entering the Nore above Ballyragget.

ANCIENT PLAIN- NAMES

Next comes our Magha or plains from the Irish word meaning “great or big.” In the barony of Gowran, extending inwards to the right bank of the Nore from the foothills of the John’s Well Hills and the Cuppanagh Hills, we have Magh Ui Chearbhaill, “the plain of O’Carrol.” Another name for this plain was Magh Rath, “the plain of the raths,” from the number of raths scattered here and there across it. We have Magh Roighne “the plain of Roighan.”
occupying all the area of the barony of Knocktopher, part of the baronies of Kells and Shillelogher from Callan to Dunamaggain through Kells, across to the left bank of the Nore and southwards as far as Inistioge. To the West of Callan we have Magh Feimhin, “the plain of Feimhin,” extending over the county border to the foot hills of Slievenamon. Further north, to the southwest of the Kilmanagh hills, and extending to Disert and across to Ballycallan, we have Magh Lacha, “the plain of the wild duck,” which name was probably given to it at a time when a great part of this area was marsh land. Some authorities state that the name is Magh Locha, i.e., “the plain of the Lake.” Our last plain is Magh Airgid Rois, “the plain of the silver (or silvery) wood,” extending on both sides of the Nore from the hills north-west of the county above Freshford, south towards Kilkenny City and from the Thornback hills across to the Castlecomer Plateau and Lower Conahy.

**BARONIES**

All the nine baronies of our county have Irish names, and are as follows, moving clockwise round the county from the north:

1.—Fassindineen—means Fasach an Deineen, “the rough land or wilderness of the Dinan.”

2.—Gowran—Bealach Gabhrain which is the full name in Irish means “the pathway of Gabhran.”

3.—Ida—means Ui or Uibh Dheagha, “the territory of the descendants of O'Dea or O'Deagha,” an old and popular name in South Kilkenny.

4.—Iverk—means Uibh Eirc, “the territory of the descendants of Eirc.”

5.—Knocktopher—means Cnoc an Tochar, “the hill of the causeway,” an improvised road through a swamp.

6.—Kells—means Ceannas, or Ceannanas, “the headship,” or “location of authority,” and understood to be the place where the provincial kings were crowned. Undoubtedly, Kells was once a centre of great importance as witness the extensive ruins still extant east of the village.

7.—Shillelogher—means Siol Mhaolodhra, “the offspring of the clan of Maolodhar.”

8.—Crannagh—means Crannach, “abounding in trees.”

9.—Galmoy—Some authorities claim that the pronunciation of this word is “Goulmoy,” meaning Gabhal Magh, “the plain of the Gabhal,” which they wish to show in the plain of the river Goul. Others claim that it is Geal-mhagh, which would mean “the bright plain.”
This brings us to the sub-division of the baronies into town­
lands with which names we are more familiar. In the case of these
sub-divisions it would be interesting to know at what period in
history did the inhabitants of our country commence enclosing
their holdings and sub-dividing them into fields surrounded by
strong clay and stone fences. We understand that the lands of
England were sub-divided from commons land into fields in the
12th and 13th century, though many place-names are recorded far
earlier than this, and it would be reasonable to assume that the
enclosing of small areas for cropping and grazing took place in
Ireland from that time onwards. Undoubtedly, it was an increase
in population and an increase in the number of individual pro­
prietors that necessitated these sub-divisions. Then, of course, arose
the necessity of naming them in order to distinguish them, one
from the other.

In the case of the townlands they got their names from a
variety of sources. They were named in many cases after their
owners, local chieftains, landed proprietors, saints or hermits who
dwelt there; sometimes from their shape and aspect or from the
nature of their surface or sub-soil; sometimes from the minerals
contained therein, or from the kinds of crops most commonly
grown, or from the trees, herbs, or flowers abounding there; some­
times as being the haunt of native or migratory birds; sometimes
from battles waged or local disasters or unusual incidents, or from
local amusements, games or assemblies, and sometimes from being
the haunt of pookas, sprites and unearthly spirits and for various
other reasons.

SUMMARY OF TOWNLANDS

In Kilkenny county we have a total of 1,576 townlands listed
in the different rural districts compiled by the County Council.
Some of these are only very small areas adjoining the towns, or
fairly large residential holdings throughout the county, while many
of them are duplicated into East and West, North and South, Lower
and Upper, Mor and Beag, Big and Little, and in one case in the
Rural District of Coolhill (Thomastown Rural District) we have
Ballinavarry, English and Irish. Regarding the latter, if we reckon
them as one townland instead of two or more, we have a total of
1193 townlands within the county.

O'Donovan's estimate of the two-thirds of the names of the
townlands which he collected throughout Ireland being purely
Irish names obtains in this county. It would be impossible to give
a detailed account of the names of all these in this paper, but it
might be helpful if I state that there are over 200 townlands be-
ginning with or incorporating the word Baile, which means "a homestead, dwelling or habitation;" 75 containing Kill, "a church," and 18 containing Kyle, "a wood." In reference to these two names there is a great difficulty in ascertaining which is which, but I feel that the local pronunciation of these two names in Co. Kilkenny is, in general, a safe line to follow in determining their original meaning. There are 146 containing Rath, 10 containing Dun, and 7 containing Lios. Of these three the meaning of which is "an earthen embankment or enclosure," it is understood that the king's dwelling was the Dun which had two ramparts surrounding it, the space between, whenever possible, being filled with water from some adjoining stream or spring, and that the flaith's or prince's dwelling was the Lios, often surrounded by a mound of earth or dry masonry, in which case it was called a rath, daingean or caiseal. We have 51 containing Cul, "a hill," or Cuil, "an angle;" 32 containing Cnoc, "a hill;" 30 containing Ban, "a dry pasture field," or sometimes a name given to untilled land; and Buaille, "a milking paddock;" 23 containing Tin, which is a corruption of Tig, "a house;" 18 containing Ath and Achadh, "a ford and a field;" 10 containing Grange or Grainseach, "a granary;" 9 containing Graig, "a hamlet;" 9 containing Currach, "a swamp" or "soft land;" 9 containing Cor, "a round hill;" 9 containing Tulach, "a hill" or "mound;" 9 containing Poll, "a hole," usually a quarry hole or deep hollow; 8 containing Ros, "a wood" or "a projecting point of land;" 8 containing Drom, "a hill ridge;" 8 containing Ard, "a height;" 8 containing Ceapach, "a tillage plot;" 7 containing Tuar, "a bleach green," "a lea-field" or "a paddock;" 6 containing Tobar, "a well;" 6 containing Cros, "a cross" or "market place;" and on down to an extensive list of places commemorating the names of former dwellers.

Many of our place-names suffered severely in translation into English, due, of course, on the part of the translators to a lack of knowledge of the Irish language. Most of the names were translated by spelling phonetically, and many of these through time have become corrupted and are in some cases very obscure. I feel, however, that we can rely almost entirely on O'Donovan's translation of the then existing Anglicised names back into Irish. My reason for stating this is, that the Irish language still survived in many districts in this county at the time of the survey, now almost 120 years ago, and that the natives of these districts must have had a fairly shrewd idea of the meaning of the local place-names, or would, at least, be more familiar with the correct pronunciation than we are today. O'Donovan, who was well versed in the Irish language, having a spoken knowledge of it from his youth, and so extremely well versed in topography, could not indeed have made very many mistakes.
To-day, the meaning of our place names seems to be a closed book to most people, except the names of their own townland or places in their immediate vicinity. This need not be so, for even with an elementary knowledge of Irish and a little interest in research work we could all add to our knowledge of the lore of our land.

FIELD- NAMES

In the names of the townlands of Ireland there is a wealth of information and a great body of words built on solid grammatical construction. But enclosed in every one of these townlands there is still a greater fund of information embodied in the names of fields, for many of these throughout Ireland have their own old Irish names. Some years ago I started collecting these names in the barony of Gowran, or rather on a line from Rosbultra, eastwards to Tullaher and northwards through Cuppanagh and Glencoum and on to Baurnafea and Coolcullen, and in the low lands adjoining these hills. In some districts, particularly in the hill areas, I collected as many as 20 names of fields in some townlands. Many, indeed, were obscure in meaning, but were purely Irish as the sounds indicated.

Besides the fields we have a great number of Irish names on the ponds and windings of our rivers. On the Nore from Annamult to Brownsbarn bridge, I collected 65 names. Of these 65 names on that short stretch of river, 22 were Irish, which gives us an idea of the number of names still uncollected on the reaches of all our rivers within the county boundaries. The collection of these and of the field names is a work that has not yet been touched upon. This is, indeed, a great pity, for assuredly, these names are going out of use from generation to generation and are gradually being lost for ever.